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Author May Be Out of CIA But Not Beyond Its Domain, Crowd Learns

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Streetlights glimmered weakly, reflected in puddles scattered on the isolated and half-empty asphalt parking lot. A damp, warm breeze tossed and sighed in the bare tree tips, a mysterious spring-like visitor to the wintry February night.

It was a perfect setting for a spy novel.

Remembrances of mysterious midnight meetings, foreign beauties, and devilish double- and triple-crosses may have been what many people expected sitting in the auditorium at Macon Junior College.

But the spy who came in from the rain Tuesday night gave, instead, a carefully considered dissection of trends and directions in U.S. intelligence.

It also was a carefully read speech. Former CIA agent Frank Snepp took obvious pains not to stray from his text, one that he bitterly told the audience had been censored and cleared by the Central Intelligence Agency.

"That's not really funny," he said when a few people chuckled.

SNEPP, A FORMER CIA operative in Vietnam and now a writer-lecturer, has the CIA's editorial assistance due to a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision following publication of *A Decent Interval*, a critical account of the intelligence operation in Vietnam, particularly during the frantic withdrawal from Saigon as North Vietnamese swept into the capitol.

The Supreme Court ruled Snepp had violated the law, although his book did not contain any secret CIA material, because he had signed a pledge not to discuss the agency without its prior approval. The court ordered Snepp to clear any future writing — fiction or nonfiction — through the CIA. The court also ordered profits from his best-seller Saigon memoir given to the federal government.

Snepp, calling it "a triumph of national security considerations over Constitutional rights," said the gag order was part of the agency's resurgence of political strength and respectability after severe criticism in the early 1970s.

The secrecy that protected the CIA and its agents from repercussions for criminal acts, domestic and abroad, began crumbling in 1973, Snepp said.

A congressional inquiry led to two overview committees, beginning a new idea the CIA was accountable to the legislative body, Snepp said.

An agreement with the federal Justice Department was ended so CIA agents could be tried for crimes.

SNEPP SAID he agreed with those restrictions. But he said the restrictions and efforts by subsequent CIA directors to deal with the agency's deteriorating image disheartened agents and reduced their effectiveness in gathering intelligence.

In 1977, when CIA Director Stansfield Turner purged the department, especially its "Dirty Tricks" group, the intelligence agency's members suffered their severest blow from within the agency's own hierarchy.

Leaks escalated. Turner moved to stop those leaks by making an example of someone, a move that Snepp said just happened to coincide with publication of *A Decent Interval*.

The gag order on Snepp and other restrictions limiting access to CIA materials are just part of the loosening of the leash on the CIA during the Carter and Reagan administrations, he said.

For example, the CIA is no longer required to tell members of congressional committees about any action that the CIA judges would endanger national security, Snepp said.

President Ronald Reagan freed the CIA to spy on domestic groups, including troublesome activist groups or anti-nuclear activists, even though those groups had no ties with foreign interests, Snepp said.

Foreign telephone calls can be recorded by the CIA, even though there is no suspicion of espionage. Searches can be made of individuals' homes in the name of national security.

THE SCOPE of covert CIA actions is increasing, particularly regarding the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, Snepp said.

The loosened restrictions and increased protection for the CIA from internal and external critics were a response to the CIA's ineffectiveness during the 1970s and early 1980s.

But Snepp said the biggest problem in the agency probably will never be resolved — the politicized leadership that interferes with the objective gathering and analysis of intelligence information.

For example, the large CIA action in Nicaragua undoubtedly will color the agency's reports of the situation there, Snepp said. In Iran, South Korea and other countries, the United States' commitment to leaders had blinded its intelligence forces to their proteges' vulnerabilities.

"We had an operative right next to the Shah (of Iran.) And we never knew until his overthrow that he had cancer," Snepp said. "We never planted anyone within the Ayatollah's movement."